



HELEN BARRETT MONTGOMERY



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MONTGOMERY
HOUSE
AMERICAN
BAPTIST
ASSEMBLY



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1861 - 1934

by Wilhermina C. Livingstone

I WAS A YOUNG MINISTER'S WIFE when I had the good fortune to come under the leadership of Helen Barrett Montgomery. She was then at the height of her career—powerful, magnetic, humble and lovable. Mrs. Montgomery was one of the most outstanding women in the history of the Baptist denomination, and one of its greatest missionary leaders. So far-reaching were her influence and leadership it was frequently said that she belonged to all denominations—yes, to the world.

Hers was a rare inheritance of parental guidance, encouragement and stimulation to achieve the best in molding her life. In a day when comparatively few women were privileged to attend college, she was graduated from Wellesley College in 1884 with high honors, proving her brilliance as a Greek scholar. For one year after graduation she taught in the Rochester High School, New York, and then for two years was co-principal of the Wellesley Preparatory School in Philadelphia. It was during this period that she met Mr. William A. Montgomery, a business man in Rochester, and their marriage ended her career as an outstanding school administrator.

Few people ever match her achievements in the years that followed. She became an author, lecturer, world traveler, crusader for moral righteousness, translator of the New Testament, preacher, teacher, a gracious and womanly personality, a defender of the faith, a Christian statesman, and, above all, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

As a crusader for moral righteousness, Mrs. Montgomery probably made her greatest impact in the interest of the Negro race. It was found at her death that she had left in her will \$10,000 each to the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. to be used within twenty-five years for the benefit of young Negro men and women of Rochester. It was she who put Christian citizenship into Baptist women's work.

She was a "first" in many enterprises in Rochester—the first woman member of the school board, first woman school commissioner, and first president of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union of Rochester. A Good Government Club, the Law Enforcement League, and the Federated Women's Clubs looked to her for leadership. With her as chairman a special committee raised \$100,000 to open the University of Rochester to women.

As a licensed minister, she frequently served as a pulpit supply. I was told that even in the midst of her sorrow she preached the Sunday following the death of her father, Dr. A. Judson Barrett, who had had a fatal heart attack on his way to their beloved Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester.

Mrs. Montgomery was a dynamic Sunday school teacher. For forty-four years she taught the Barrett Memorial Class of Lake Avenue Baptist Church. That class of women, set on fire for world redemption, became a force not only in the city of Rochester but overseas as well. At the same time, for forty years, Mr. Montgomery taught a large class for men.

She was the first woman president of the Northern Baptist Convention, serving during 1921-1922. This was, in fact, the first time any woman had been elected to the presidency of a large Christian body. When the name of Helen Barrett Montgomery was presented to the Convention by the nominating committee, the shouts of both men and women made the rafters ring.

At the time of the merger of the Woman's Foreign Mission Societies of the East and West in 1914, Mrs. Montgomery was elected their first president and was continued in office until 1924, except for the year she was president of the Convention. The World Wide Guild was organized in 1915 under the leadership of Mrs. Montgomery, Mrs. Andrew MacLeish and Mrs. Henry W. Peabody. Within a few years chapters were enrolled in thirteen countries.

In 1921 the Baptist women had their jubilee. The plan was to raise a thousand dollars for every golden day of the golden year. Each of the ten districts of the Convention assumed responsibility for a building on the foreign fields. Going over

the top to a total of \$450,000, the ten jubilee buildings became a reality in Japan, India, Burma, China and Belgian Congo.

The publication of Mrs. Montgomery's *Centenary Translation of the New Testament* in February, 1924, was the enduring feature of the centennial of the American Baptist Publication Society. In the years since, there have been 14 printings—one on the average of every two years.

Mrs. Montgomery's attainments were watched with interest in scholastic circles. Four honorary degrees were conferred upon her: Master of Arts, by Brown University; Doctor of Laws, by Denison University; Doctor of Humane Letters, by Franklin College; and Doctor of Laws, by Wellesley, her alma mater. Five times only had Wellesley conferred this degree on a woman.

However thoroughly Baptist Mrs. Montgomery was, she always had room in her mind and heart for every worthy inter-denominational effort of Protestant women to advance the Kingdom of her Lord. Some of these efforts she initiated, and all of them she strengthened with every resource at her disposal.

In the early 1890's she and Mrs. Henry W. Peabody had the vision of a day set apart when women of the world might unite in prayer for foreign missions. In 1919 this special day was combined with the Day of Prayer for Home Missions, begun in 1887, and thus the present World Day of Prayer came into being.

Mrs. Montgomery's voice was one of the most popular at the Northfield and Chautauqua summer conferences. The women opened Northfield in 1903 as a center for study and training. Five denominational women's mission boards had established together the Central Committee on United Study of Foreign Missions for the publication, with more economy, of mission study books. Out of the study grew the conferences, and out of the publishing business grew the close cooperation of the Central Committee and the Missionary Education Movement, especially in the publication of youth and children's materials. Mrs. Montgomery's study books and guides gave much of the early impetus to the Central Committee, which sold 4 million

books within the 38 years of its existence. Some of these books were translated into foreign languages. The first one of the six from her pen was *Christus Redemptor* in 1905, and her *Bible and Missions*, the fourth, sold 150,000 copies within ten months.

Mrs. Montgomery became widely known during the Protestant women's jubilee of 1910-1911. It was the 50th anniversary of the organization of the first woman's missionary society. The official team of jubilee speakers began their itinerary in October, 1910, in the West and concluded the meetings in New York City in 1911. Mrs. Montgomery, called by a news reporter the "dynamo of the Jubilee," was chosen to give the final address in Carnegie Hall, New York City, her 209th in the series. Her book *Western Women in Eastern Lands* played a large part in the inspiration and final result of these meetings. The women's treasury was richer by one million dollars.

With their two daughters as "chaperons" Mrs. Montgomery and Mrs. Peabody set out in 1913 for a world tour. Mrs. Peabody had been entrusted by the International Council of Churches, then meeting in Holland, with the task of exploring the possibility of establishing a college in south India after the pattern of Isabella Thoburn College in the north. Hundreds of girls were being graduated from mission high schools without opportunity for college work. The matter was thoroughly explored and a visit made to the hospital at Vellore, then in charge of Dr. Ida Scudder. Hopes were soaring. The travelers went on to Burma, to China, and it was in Japan that Mrs. Montgomery finished collecting material for her mission study book *The King's Highway*, which broke all previous records with a sale of 160,000 copies.

World War I broke out soon after the return of these women from abroad, thus making necessary the postponement of any financial drive until 1920. However, even before adequate funds were in hand the colleges began to open. Mrs. Peabody as chairman of the campaign for seven union women's colleges in the Orient secured from the trustees of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund a promise of a million dollars if the women raised double that amount. It is a story of heroic

effort, and Mrs. Montgomery was at the heart of it. With the three million dollars in hand, the union colleges were built—three in China, three in India, and one in Japan.

The stewardship of talents that characterized both Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery was matched by their insistence on giving at least a tithe of their money. At one time of stringency they were forced to sell their home; at another period, it was discovered later, they had lived on borrowed money for eight months. In neither instance could they be persuaded to reduce their contribution to Christian causes. These days of difficulty came about because Mr. Montgomery, in spite of pessimists, had invested his small capital in a young inventor working in a dark room on a starter for automobiles. It was several years before dividends came in. But always they lived simply, and by their "divine arithmetic" they gave of goods and life. On the sixtieth anniversary of the Woman's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Mrs. Montgomery gave the Society an annuity gift of \$100,000. In her will she bequeathed no less than \$455,000 to more than eighty beneficiaries, the majority of them Christian causes.

Among the historic Baptist figures which appear in a stained glass window in the beautiful new First Baptist Church, Washington, D. C., Mrs. Montgomery is included.

It is altogether fitting that a beautiful home at the American Baptist Assembly, Green Lake, Wisconsin, should be named for Helen Barrett Montgomery and dedicated to her memory. Her devoted friend, Mrs. Howard Wayne Smith, said of her, "We wish that she were still with us, and are led by the thought of her to Him Whose she was, Whom she served, with Whom her strong and gracious being is forever glorified."*

**Helen Barrett Montgomery, Fleming H. Revell, 1940, p. 139.*



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